

Civil War Book Review

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The Price of Liberty: African Americans and the Making of Liberia

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Review

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Bobrick, Benson *Testament: A Soldier's Story of the Civil War*. Simon & Schuster, \$23.00 ISBN 743250915

The archetypal Union soldier

The Civil War letters of Benjamin W. Baker

In **Testament: A Soldier's Story of the Civil War**, Benson Bobrick introduces us to his great-grandfather, Benjamin W. (Webb) Baker of Coles County, Illinois. Baker's 90 Civil War letters had been transcribed in the early 20th century and handed down through the family for generations until they came into Bobrick's possession. Rather than simply republish the letters, Bobrick has provided a dual volume: the first section tells the story of Webb Baker's life in the context of the Civil War and the second part reproduces the transcribed letters themselves.

One can well understand Bobrick's desire to have Baker's words reach a wider audience. In many ways Webb Baker was the archetypal Union soldier. He was just 20 when the war began, an Illinois farm boy whose greatest excitement prior to the war had been witnessing one of the Lincoln-Douglas debates in 1858. Baker enlisted in Company E of the 25th Illinois Volunteer Infantry the summer of 1861, following the Union defeat at Bull Run. Like many soldiers who enlisted locally, Webb served with friends, neighbors, cousins, and his stepbrother. Baker's regiment served first in Missouri, and went on to see action at Pea Ridge, Corinth, Perryville, Stones River, Chickamauga, and the Atlanta Campaign. Webb was wounded twice: grazed by bullets at Pea Ridge, and more seriously at Chickamauga where a bullet lodged in his arm. He spent several months recuperating in a hospital behind the lines, before rejoining his regiment at Marietta, only to be mustered out on August 1, 1864. He lost his beloved younger brother (whom he had tried to dissuade from enlisting) at Perryville.

Where Webb Baker may have differed from the average soldier was in his remarkable eloquence. His letters are by turns funny and serious, descriptive and introspective, and vibrantly written. He kept his family up to date not just on the progress of the war and the engagements in which he fought, but on the details of daily life—in particular the quality and quantity of rations, and his fluctuating weight (though he seemed never to have dropped below a healthy 200 pounds).

Baker's letters are most valuable in tracing his passage from youthful enthusiasm for war to a sense of grim resignation and even, one might argue, a degree of disillusionment. Webb enlisted, as so many young men did, for a sense of patriotism and duty which as a good citizen I owe to my country, to my friends & to liberty. By the time he was wounded two years later, he was content to remain in convalescent camp till after the fight. His later letters included many complaints about war weariness among the civilians, and about shortages of pay and meat. The ultimate sign of his disillusionment was that he chose not to reenlist in 1864, instead returning home to Illinois in the fall of that year.

The letters are the real strength of this book. When describing Baker or using his words, Bobrick's narrative flows briskly. When he turns (as he does too often) away from Baker to the war as a whole, it tends to bog down in a standard (and rather unoriginal) retelling of the war. As the attention shifts away from Baker, the reader becomes confused about the real purpose of this book—is it the story of one man's Civil War experiences? Is it the story of the Civil War through one man's eyes? One wishes that Bobrick would have done more to place Baker in a broader social context by taking advantage of the very fine work that has been done on soldiers and wartime society. Bobrick's decision to go with notes only for quotations is also problematic, and makes this book of limited utility for scholars and students.

In the end this is a frustrating book. Webb Baker is such an engaging character that one is left wishing he could be found more clearly in the thickets of narrative. Fortunately, those readers who want to read more Baker and less Bobrick, can skip directly to the letters in the back and read to their heart's content.

Anne Sarah Rubin is a co-author of the prizewinning Valley of the Shadow Project. Her book, A Shattered Nation: The Rise and Fall of the Confederacy, 1861-1868 will be published in January 2005 by the University of North Carolina Press. She currently is an Assistant Professor of History at the

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